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GOP Caucus Backs Senate Leadership

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Maryland Senate Minority Leader J. Lowell Stoltzfus survived a leadership challenge from fellow Republicans yesterday, securing enough votes from his 14-member caucus to retain his position for the coming year.

Stoltzfus (Somerset) announced his fate to reporters after a 90-minute closed-door meeting in which Sen. E.J. Pipkin (R-Queen Anne's) offered himself as an alternative. Pipkin, who ran unsuccessfully for U.S. Senate last year, has said in recent days that he believes he would be a better leader heading into an election year.

The Republican caucus also voted to retain Sen. Andrew P. Harris (Baltimore County) as minority whip, the No. 2 GOP position in the chamber. Harris was challenged by Sen. David R. Brinkley (Frederick).

"I can assure you this caucus has never been more united," Stoltzfus said after the meeting, flanked by Pipkin, Harris, Brinkley and other Republican senators.

Stoltzfus, who has been minority leader for five years and was whip for three years before that, also faced a leadership challenge last session. Generally affable and mild-mannered, he has played a more aggressive role in recent weeks, defending Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s administration during an ongoing legislative investigation of its firing practices.

Stoltzfus has endured criticism from some in his caucus for reflexively following the lead of the Republican governor on a range of issues. Asked yesterday if Ehrlich had played a role in the Senate leadership battle, Stoltzfus declined to comment.

Pipkin told reporters that he believed "the process worked" in picking a leader but did not elaborate. Neither senator would publicly disclose the margin of the vote.

Republicans next year will seek to expand the number of seats they control in the 47-member Senate. Although they acknowledge parity with Democrats remains a long-term goal, picking up five seats would make it easier to sustain filibusters, a parliamentary procedure that can thwart the will of the chamber's majority.

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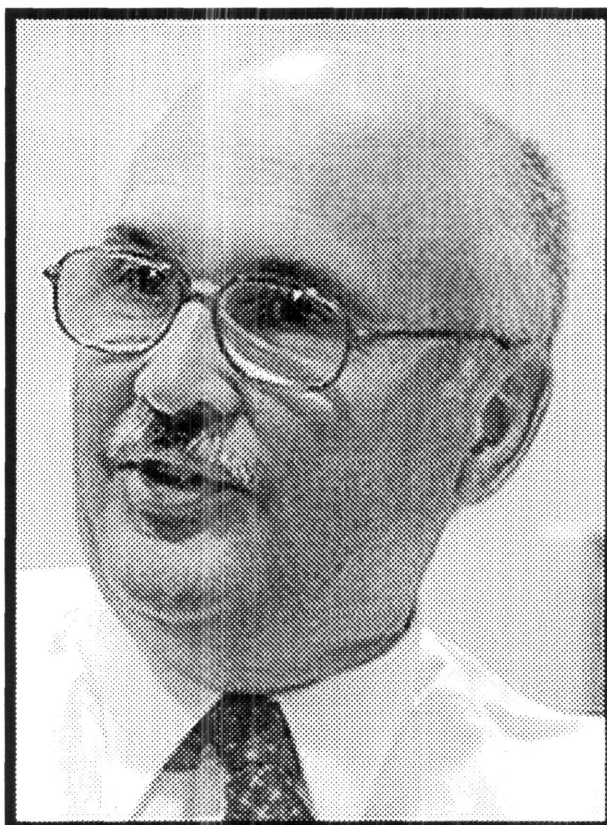
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Sen. J. Lowell Stoltzfus also was challenged last session.

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